

Israeli ministers float limited West Bank pullout

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 30 December 2010 23:10



A Palestinian worker pauses to pray as others work on a construction site in the Jewish West Bank settlement of Maaleh Adumim near Jerusalem on Dec. 8, 2010. (AP / Tara Todras-Whitehill)

JERUSALEM — With Mideast peace talks at an impasse, two senior members of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud Party are shopping around a new idea: In the absence of peace, Israel should pull large numbers of Jewish settlers out of the West Bank while leaving its soldiers in place.

They believe the arrangement could relieve international pressure on Israel over settlements and give the Palestinians wider autonomy in an area they hope to make their future state, while leaving Israel in control of security matters until a peace agreement is reached.

There are no signs that Netanyahu supports this idea, and it would fall far short of Palestinian demands.

Israeli ministers float limited West Bank pullout

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 30 December 2010 23:10

But at a time when Israel's settlement policies are largely blamed internationally for the breakdown in peace talks, some in Israel believe such an initiative could be just what is needed to defuse the pressure.

Cabinet minister Michael Eitan, a Likud veteran and a longtime ally of Netanyahu, is perhaps the most vocal proponent of the idea in the government.

On his website, Eitan says an Israeli pullout from parts of the West Bank — the heart of any future Palestine — is inevitable, and the country must be honest with itself and its allies.

"If it becomes clear to our friends and partners that we tricked them, they will be angry, we will pay twice over, and we will lose the little legitimacy we have left for our legitimate demands," he wrote.

Eitan calls on the government to decide which parts of the West Bank will be ceded in any peace deal and then persuade settlers to accept compensation and leave, replacing them with troops.

While more dovish politicians have suggested similar arrangements in the past, Eitan comes from the heart of the traditionally pro-settlement Likud, where such views would have been unthinkable not long ago.

An even more influential Likud Cabinet minister, Dan Meridor — who sits in a key seven-member forum that advises Netanyahu — has also been promoting a similar idea in meetings with the Likud rank and file.

A few years ago, "such a speech at a meeting of Likud members would have caused him to be driven from the house in shame," Israeli analyst Ben Caspit wrote in the Maariv daily on Friday.

Israeli ministers float limited West Bank pullout

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 30 December 2010 23:10

"Today, the members listen...A large number of them agree."

The proposal is reminiscent of another outside-the-box Israeli move, the unilateral pullout from the Gaza Strip in 2005.

That withdrawal was also initiated by an Israeli Government dominated by hard-liners who feared that political deadlock could force them to make even greater concessions they saw as potentially dangerous.

Similar conditions seem to exist now.

However, the Gaza pullout today is widely seen domestically as a failure.

Extremist Islamic Hamas militants overran the territory two years later, and Palestinian militants continue to fire rockets into southern Israel from Gaza.

The ideas being floated by the Likud Cabinet ministers try to avoid some of the mistakes from the Gaza withdrawal.

First, soldiers would remain in place in the West Bank to prevent militant activity.

And while Eitan believes Israel should act unilaterally, Meridor believes any withdrawal should be coordinated with the Palestinians.

Neither minister agreed to speak about his proposal, but spokesmen for both confirmed the details.

Israeli ministers float limited West Bank pullout

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 30 December 2010 23:10

Both men have been vague on the extent of any pullback.

A move could range from uprooting the residents of small, isolated settlements deep in the West Bank, home to just a few thousand settlers, to removing all of the around 70,000 who live beyond the separation barrier that Israel has built in recent years.

Withdrawing behind that line would leave some 90 percent of the West Bank in Palestinian hands.

About 300,000 Israelis live in the Jewish settlements that dot the West Bank, and many are determined to remain there come what may.

Many of the 8,000 settlers who were removed from Gaza had to be carried out of their homes.

Netanyahu's spokesman, Mark Regev, said the ministers "are representing their own opinion and not that of the prime minister."

Settlers predictably reject the idea.

"Israel would pay in such a case a tremendously high political and social price and get no benefit at all," said Dani Dayan, a settler leader.

The proposals are far from anything the Palestinians would consider sufficient in a peace deal.

Both politicians, for example, reject any withdrawal in Jerusalem, where the Palestinians want to establish their capital.

Israeli ministers float limited West Bank pullout

Written by Administrator

Thursday, 30 December 2010 23:10

A spokesman for the Palestinian Authority, Ghassan Khatib, dismissed the idea as a distraction from negotiations.

"It's time for the Israelis to think of simply ending the occupation," Khatib said.

The Palestinians claim all of the West Bank, as well as neighboring east Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, for a future state.

The international community considers the Israeli settlements illegal, and the Palestinians have said they won't return to negotiations until Israel halts all settlement construction.

The latest round of peace talks broke down in late September, just three weeks after their launch, when a limited Israeli settlement freeze expired.

Netanyahu, who last year endorsed the idea of a Palestinian state, says he is willing to discuss the fate of the settlements in negotiations but remains opposed to renewing the freeze.